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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes a larger document of the same title which takes the position that because American democracy is founded on the premise that citizens need to engage in free and open discussion of opposing points of view, it is important that intellectual conflict become part of college instruction. It suggests several ways in which structured academic controversy and intellectual conflict can be used to enrich classroom instruction at colleges and universities. Five steps are proposed as a way to create an academic experience that will result in increased achievement and retention, better problem-solving and decision-making skills, positive interpersonal relationships, and greater social competence and self-esteem. The steps are: first, pairs of students are assigned to research and prepare an assigned issue; second, they present the best case possible; then, opposing pairs engage in open discussion, advocating their initial position while learning the opposing one; next, students reverse perspective to present the opposing position; and, finally, students integrate different ideas and facts into a single position. The instructor sets objectives for learning and social skills, monitors the student debate, and evaluates academic achievement. (CH)

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Both theoretical and practical reasons support the belief that arousing intellectual conflict is one of the most important and powerful instructional procedures available to college faculty. Yet most faculty avoid and suppress intellectual conflict, perhaps out of fear it will be divisive, or because they have never been trained in how to use instructional procedures that maximize the likelihood that intellectual conflict will be constructive, not destructive, or because the current societal and pedagogical norms discourage them from doing so. This situation needs to change, and intellectual conflict needs to become part of day-to-day student life in colleges and universities.

●WHAT IS ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY?

The path to using intellectual conflict for instructional purposes lies primarily through academic controversy. Controversy exists when one individual's ideas, information, conclusions, theories, and opinions are incompatible with those of another. To engage in controversy and seek to reach an agreement, students must research and prepare a position, present and advocate their position, refute opposing positions and rebut attacks on their own position, reverse perspectives, and create a synthesis that all group members can agree to. Structured academic controversies are most often contrasted with concurrence seeking, debate, and individualistic learning. For instance, students can inhibit discussion to avoid any disagreement and compromise quickly to reach a consensus while they discuss the issue (concurrence seeking) or appoint a judge and then debate the different positions with the expectation that the judge will determine who presents the better position (debate) or work independently with their own set of materials at their own pace (individualistic learning).

Academic controversy, structured appropriately, results in increased achievement and retention, higher-quality problem solving and decision making, more frequent creative insight, more thorough exchange of expertise, greater task involvement, more positive interpersonal relationships among students, and greater social competence, self-esteem, and ability to cope with stress and adversity. The process from which these outcomes are derived involves an opposing point of view to an initial conclusion about an issue, a state of uncertainty or disequilibrium, which motivates a search for more information and a more adequate cognitive perspective, and the derivation of a new, reconceptualized conclusion. The procedure used to implement this process consists of five steps: (1) researching and preparing the best case possible for the assigned position, (2) making a persuasive presentation as to the validity of the position, (3) engaging in an open discussion by continuing to advocate one's own position, attempting to refute the opposing position, and rebutting others' attacks, (4) reversing perspectives and presenting the opposing position as persuasively and completely as possible, and (5) creating a synthesis that is students' best reasoned judgment on the issue.

● WHAT IS THE INSTRUCTOR'S ROLE IN ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY?

The instructor's role in implementing structured academic controversies is an extension of the instructor's role in using cooperative learning. It consists of specifying the objectives for learning and social skills, making a number of decisions before beginning the process, explaining and orchestrating the academic task and the controversy procedure, monitoring students as they engage in the controversy and intervening when necessary to improve students' work as individuals and a team, and evaluating academic achievement by processing how well students used the controversy procedure. Academic controversies can be used in any subject area with any age student. But to implement academic controversies successfully, instructors need to teach students the interpersonal and small-group skills required to cooperate, engage in intellectual inquiry, intellectually challenge each other, see a situation from several perspectives simultaneously, and synthesize a variety of positions into a new and creative decision.

● WHAT STEPS ARE INVOLVED IN ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY?

In an academic controversy, students are randomly assigned to groups of four, which are then divided into two pairs. Each pair is assigned a pro or a con position on an issue being studied. In step 1 of the

procedure, each pair of students researches the assigned position, organizes its findings into a conceptual framework that uses both inductive and deductive logic to persuade the audience that its position is valid and correct, and builds a persuasive and compelling case for the position's validity. In step 2, students persuasively present the best case possible for their assigned position, listen carefully to the opposing presentation, and try to learn the data and logic on which it is based. In step 3, students engage in an open discussion, continuing to advocate their position while trying to learn the opposing position. They critically analyze the evidence and logic of the opposing position and try to refute both. At the same time, they rebut the attacks on their evidence and logic in an effort to persuade the opponents to agree with them.

In step 4, the students reverse perspectives and present the opposing position as sincerely, completely, accurately, and persuasively as they can. In a controversy, students are asked to adopt a specific perspective (a way of viewing the world and their relationship to it) in preparing the best case for a position on an issue being studied. From preparing a rationale for the position and advocating the position to others in their group, students become embedded in the perspective. Adopting the assigned perspective is necessary to make sure that the position being represented receives a fair and complete hearing. To free students from their perspective and to increase their understanding of the opposing perspective, students reverse perspectives: Each pair presents the best case possible for the opposing position, being as sincere and enthusiastic as if the position were its own. Doing so has many benefits, including increasing students' ability to synthesize the best evidence and reasoning from both sides.

The fifth step is synthesizing, which occurs when students integrate a number of different ideas and facts into a single position. Synthesizing involves putting things together in fewer words, creative insight, and adopting a new position that subsumes the previous two. Students must drop all advocacy and see new patterns in a body of evidence. They do so by viewing the issue from a variety of perspectives and generating a number of optional ways of integrating the evidence. The dual purposes of synthesis are to arrive at the best possible position on the issue and to find a position that all group members can agree to and commit themselves to. In achieving these purposes, students should avoid the dualistic trap of choosing which position is "right" and which is "wrong," avoid the relativistic trap of stating that both positions are correct, depending on one's perspective, and think probabilistically in formulating a synthesis that everyone can agree to.

• WHAT IS THE RESULT OF ACADEMIC CONTROVERSY?

American democracy is founded on the premise that "truth" will result from free and open discussion in which opposing points of view are advocated and vigorously argued, that truth will arise from the uninhibited clash of opposing views. To be a citizen in a democracy, individuals need to master the process of advocating one's view, challenging opposing positions, making a decision, and committing themselves to implement the decision made (regardless of whether one initially favored the alternative adopted).

Thomas Jefferson based his faith in the future on the power of constructive conflict. Although numerous theorists have advocated the use of intellectual conflict in instructional situations, some have been reluctant to do so, perhaps because of a cultural fear of conflict, a lack of knowledge of the procedures, and cultural and pedagogical norms discouraging the use of conflict. Academic controversy provides a clear procedure for faculty to use in promoting intellectual conflict. The skills required to implement this procedure are intellectual skills that all college students need to develop sooner or later. And engaging in a controversy can be fun, enjoyable, and exciting.

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